Chinese Cinderella

Adeline Yen Mah

Eighty-four pages into Adenline Yen Mah’s *Chinese Cinderella* and my feelings about Wu Mei and her family have only depreciated. Where I left off in the story Wu Mei’s siblings were starting to give into Niang’s demands to make their lives a bit easier for them, and this plan seemed to be working for them because none of them really complained about anything until New Year’s came around. In China, it’s a custom to wear new clothing when a New Year starts because it symbolizes change, so the children were all excited about the new clothes that were being made for them, until they actually received the clothing. Wu Mei and her siblings all received out-dated clothing while Wu Mei’s half siblings received stylish western clothing.

The five siblings are marched upstairs and devised a plan to get back at Niang for neglecting them while her children received everything they wanted. They decided to have Big Sister write an anonymous letter to their father in Chinese (so that Niang would be unable to read it) describing the unfair treatment the five of them were receiving, however when Third Brother went to go to the bathroom, he found Niang listening through the door to their plan and immediately explained to his siblings that they should destroy any evidence of their plan so that they would not have to deal with Niang’s wrath.

To their surprise, Niang had said nothing about their unveiled plan when dinner came around; instead she seemed rather pleasant compared to most days. It wasn’t until Big Sister was offered the spare room on “their” floor (the five siblings all lived on the top floor of their house while Niang, their father, and their half-siblings all lived on the first floor and none of the five siblings were allowed on the first floor without permission) that the rest of the siblings figured out what Niang was doing. She was turning Big Sister against them so that she can become aware of any of the plans the siblings might conjure up in the future, not to mention that Big Sister is considered the “leader” of the group, and Niang’s plan was working flawlessly. Big Sister received treatment that was almost identical to her half-siblings and her new room was well furnished with a desk and lacy curtains with a matching bedspread.

Without the help of Big Sister, the four siblings returned to their depressing lives with no chances of a major rebellion in the future. With that being said, the only way Wu Mei could preoccupy herself and get attention from her family was if she continued to do well with her studies. Wu Mei continued week after week to be at the top of her class and eventually picked up writing as a hobby. She described that writing allowed her to escape the cruelty of her life into a world where everything she wanted to happen could.

In the spring, Wu Mei’s father left with Niang and the two spoiled half-siblings to Tianjin and everything in the house seemed to be happier. The now four sibling group was able to finally be treated as their older sister and half-siblings were for they could eat whatever they wanted to, go out wherever they wanted, and hang out with their friends after school; but without Niang bothering Wu Mei’s older siblings, they picked on her more often because they still believed Wu Mei killed their biological mother.

I honestly wish that Wu Mei’s siblings weren’t so mean to her. It’s already bad enough that she has to deal with Niang at her worst, since she refuses to give into any demands that she makes, she doesn’t need her siblings picking on her and treating her like an outcast. At least Third brother is starting to be friends with Wu Mei. When the two of them spend time together he at least treats her fairly, but I was kind of hoping that by this point in the story the five of them would have grouped to together and started to demand to be treated better or at least bring the unfair treatment to their father’s attention since he appears to be completely unaware of anything that’s not related to his work. I can’t blame the father for Niang’s actions, but how is it possible that you can’t see how miserable your children are? I would think that he would at least notice the difference in their behavior from when he was married to his first wife because judging by the descriptions the siblings give the siblings all felt safer and happier when she was around.

In connection to the essential/course question, I still stand by what I said last time. Wu Mei is definitely displaying “hero” like characteristics, but I’ve also noticed who reserved she is from other people. Due to Niang’s rule about not be able to hang out with her friends after school as well as her persistence to not comply with Niang’s demands, Wu Mei spends all of her time to herself and although this improves her academics she is failing to develop necessary social skills. Her character to me has started to become the book smart type rather than the common sense type, which isn’t particularly a bad thing, but a person needs to have a balance of both in order to truly be considered intelligent. I consider this book smart type to be a human characteristic that has spanned time because there has always been that one person who has the ability to spit out random pieces of correct information, but when you ask them to do a task they over think it or do it in a much more difficult way than what was necessary.